



THE ESSENTIAL  
**OTIS  
RUSH**

THE CLASSIC

*Cobra*

RECORDINGS  
1956-1958

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RECORDINGS  
1956-1958

1. I CAN'T QUIT YOU BABY
2. SIT DOWN BABY
3. VIOLENT LOVE
4. MY LOVE WILL NEVER DIE
5. GROANING THE BLUES
6. IF YOU WERE MINE
7. LOVE THAT WOMAN
8. JUMP SISTER BESSIE
9. THREE TIMES A FOOL
10. SHE'S A GOOD 'UN
11. IT TAKES TIME
12. CHECKING ON MY BABY
13. DOUBLE TROUBLE
14. KEEP ON LOVING ME BABY
15. ALL YOUR LOVE [I MISS LOVING]
16. MY BABY IS A GOOD 'UN
17. I CAN'T QUIT YOU BABY [TAKE 3]
18. SIT DOWN BABY
19. GROANING THE BLUES [TAKE 3]
20. MY LOVE WILL NEVER DIE [TAKE UNKNOWN]
21. SHE'S A GOOD 'UN [TAKE 4]
22. THREE TIMES A FOOL [TAKE UNKNOWN]
23. DOUBLE TROUBLE [TAKE 3]
24. SIT DOWN BABY [TAKE UNKNOWN]



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CHICAGO BLUES CLASSICS 1956-1958



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I CAN'T QUIT YOU BABY.  
(Dixon)

OTIS RUSH.  
5000

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23. **DOUBLE TROUBLE [TAKE 3]** (Rush) Tristan Music Ltd. © 1958  
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# OTIS RUSH – GOOD 'UN'S

## THE CLASSIC COBRA RECORDINGS 1956-1958

The name Otis Rush always evokes a special feeling amongst blues fans. The sheer emotional weight of his voice, echoed by the searing quality of the solos he wrenches from his guitar, creates a uniquely dramatic atmosphere – even for a music form that thrives on drama and high emotion. One of mid-Fifties Chicago's Young Turks of the blues (a phrase he finds meaningless), his fundamental impact on the music ultimately rests upon these sides recorded for Cobra between 1956 and 1958. His fifty-year career has contained a number of memorable recordings but none has surpassed the tortuous and tortured sounds that were coaxed from Eli Toscano's inadequately-equipped backroom studio...

Nothing about the finished records was inadequate, though. Most of Rush's singles were written, arranged and produced by Willie Dixon – who also played bass on the sessions. Later on Otis would write his own songs, but Dixon's presence remained ubiquitous, for he could attract musicians from the top rank of Chicago's blues elite. Harmonica players Little

Walter and Walter Horton, saxophonists Harold Ashby, Red Holloway and Jackie Brenston, pianists Lafayette Leake and Little Brother Montgomery, guitarists Wayne Bennett, Louis Myers and Ike Turner, drummers Al Duncan and Odie Payne; all made crucial contributions to the intense atmosphere of most of the sessions. (It's hard to attribute tension to Otis' perfunctory re-run of Dixon's old Big Three Trio ditty, 'Violent Love'...)

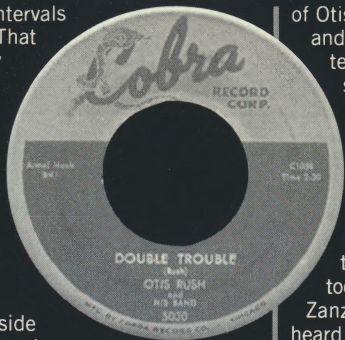
By his own admission – and unlike many of his contemporaries – Otis Rush didn't take a serious interest in the guitar until after he'd arrived, aged fifteen, in Chicago in 1949. He was born on the Otis Lewis farm outside Philadelphia, Ms. on April 29, 1934. His mother never married but there were five brothers and two sisters in the family. Although they sang in church, there was no musical tradition within the family. An uncle had a guitar that he wasn't playing and Otis' brother Leroy bought it from him and did nothing with it himself. When Leroy left for work, Otis would pick it up, stroke its strings and

figure out the intervals of the tuning. That way when Leroy came home, it was as if it hadn't been touched.

What Otis didn't realise was that being left-handed, he was holding the conventionally tuned guitar upside down and backwards.

'When I put it on it was strung up right-handed and I just began to learn that way by ear. I didn't know I should put the guitar on the other side and restring it, you know. So I just left it and began to learn notes and some chords.'

The principal source of music in his home was the radio; WLAC in Nashville pumped out country music and Otis learned to pick along with Eddy Arnold, Bill Monroe and Hank Williams. Later, there was a record player and he used its different speeds to slow records down, in order to learn the intricacies of Tommy McClennan and Lightnin' Hopkins records. There was another guitarist, Vaughan Adams, living on the farm and he too became the subject



of Otis' study. Still, music was a pastime and farming was the norm for the teenager. That was until he paid his sister Elizabeth a visit after she'd moved north to Chicago.

The idea was to stay a while, get a temporary job for a few weeks and then return to the five-acre plot that he now farmed back in Philadelphia. That plan went out the window the first night Elizabeth took him to see Muddy Waters at the Zanzibar. 'As we got out of the car, I heard this music,' he told Living Blues. 'I'm thinking it's a record, a jukebox. And when I went in there and looked up on my left, they was up there playin' that stuff, and I flipped out, man. I said, Damn, this is for me.' The effect – like the music – was electric. 'I froze up in the seat and just look at 'em and drink me a beer. I got up and left when I was expired by them, man.'

Spurred into action, Otis bought himself a Kay guitar, a DeArmond pickup and a small amplifier 'that was so cheap, when you hit a note it jumped off the floor'. He'd got himself a job at the G.H. Hamilton Company cold storage plant, which enabled him to rent his own room at 3101 Wentworth, across the hall from his sister. He proceeded to endear himself to the

neighbours as he loudly practiced his guitar at the open window of his third floor apartment. 'But I was enjoyin' the hell out of it, and I just played day and night.' Down the street at 2711 was the Club Alibi and one evening the owner came knocking on his door with a request that Otis stand in for the band that hadn't shown up that night. 'The man said, I'll pay you five dollars. Five dollars for me playing my guitar? I thought that was terrific!' One night turned into three or four nights a week and Otis could no longer sustain a day job and his nightly music making. The job had to go.

As his name got around, he graduated from the Alibi to the Brown Derby and the 708 Club. He was also able to recruit band members like guitarist Poor Bob Woodfork, harmonica player Earl Payton and drummer T.J. McNulty, who he'd met at G.H. Hamilton. By the time he got his fifteen dollar gig at the 708 Club, Otis was playing with Dave and Louis Myers. The Myers, with Fred Below and Junior Wells, then playing with Muddy Waters, also gigged as the Four Aces. 'It was at the 708 that Willie Dixon and Eli Toscano came by from Cobra Records and asked me if I would record for them. I was happy to, of course.'



Toscano was a heavy gambler and entrepreneur who'd drawn Dixon away from the Chess brothers on the promise of more regular – and more regularly paid – employment. His studio on Roosevelt Street was a makeshift affair. 'I don't know what it were before I went there,' he told Guitar Player, 'but it was a building, two or three rooms together there. The amps was sittin' on the floor and they had little shields and things up around the walls, little booths.' Dixon was evidently good at making a virtue out of a necessity and somehow the ensuing sessions benefited from the wildly ambient nature of the sound that reached the tape machine. Add to that the springback repeat echo liberally applied to Otis' vocal and his guitar solos and a recipe for success was instantly concocted.

Otis' first single, 'I Can't Quit You Baby', defined his style forever. 'Willie said he had a song for me to sing. Willie would just hum the sound,

he never played anything, you know. He would try to give me some phrases how the song go and I pretty much did it on my own, the way it sounded. The way I sang the song and the way I played my guitar is what I wanted to play.' Lead guitar chores were shared between Otis and Wayne Bennett, longtime Bobby Bland band member. Walter Horton's harmonica wove in between Red Holloway's tenor lines. 'Believe me, I didn't know what I was getting into when I record this record. . . And it was a hit. It was the biggest record for me for a long time.'

The way he tells it, Otis was a reluctant Dixon protégé. The reason Dixon had fallen out with Chess was their refusal of the new talent he brought to their door. Because of his position, young musicians courted his favour and in return he'd try to get them on record. 'Willie was like a father to all the musicians in those days, he was writing for everybody. We all sort of depended on him,' he told Guitar Magazine. From the beginning, Otis found the yoke uncomfortable and it's hard not to sympathise with him when Dixon had him recut 'Violent Love', an insipid love song the Big Three Trio had recorded for Columbia some years previously. 'Then he had this 'Groanin'

The Blues' and 'Jump Sister Bessie' – I said, Man, this is some horseshit all over. I didn't know whether to scratch my watch or wind my head by now. I said, I can do better than this.' There was also 'Love That Woman', which used the stop-time rhythm of 'Hoochie Coochie Man'. Because of the success of 'I Can't Quit You Baby', public expectation demanding follow-up songs like 'My Love Will Never Die' and 'Groanin' The Blues'. Otis obliged with 'Three Times A Fool', 'Double Trouble' and 'All Your Love (I Miss Loving)', the latter with an opening guitar riff adapted from George Gershwin's 'Summertime'.

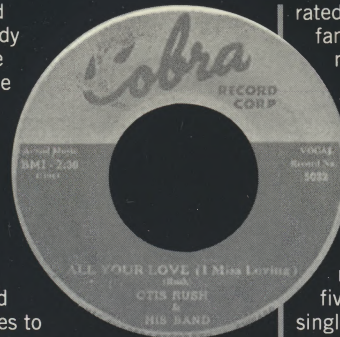
The records put Otis' price up, and he became a prominent member of a group of young musicians who were changing the face of Chicago blues. Up until the mid-Fifties most bands, including those of Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf, performed sitting down. But Otis, Freddie King, Luther Allison,



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Magic Sam and newcomer Buddy Guy (who made his debut at one of Otis' 708 gigs) stood up and took their music to the audience. They also tended to dispense with harmonicas and used saxophones to bolster their rhythmic support. History has defined this as the 'West Side Sound' but Otis denies any knowledge of it. 'It doesn't mean anything to me,' he told Blues Revue. We were all just playing music – playing blues. I played the same music with the same musicians on the West Side, the South Side and later when I got to play the North Side. It was just blues.'

The final 1958 Cobra session found the regular studio musicians augmented by the lead guitar of Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston's baritone sax. The songs were the atmospheric 'Double Trouble', 'Keep On Loving Me Baby', the latinate 'All Your Love (I Miss Loving)' and the rocking 'My Baby's A Good 'Un'. Despite being highly



rated by subsequent generations of blues fans, none of these later records managed to maintain the impact of 'I Can't Quit You Baby'. Toscano's gambling debts brought an end to Cobra and its subsidiary, Artistic. Willie Dixon reinstated himself with Chess and Otis followed him to the label. Two sessions and two singles, including 'So Many Roads, So Many Trains', emerged but went nowhere. Two years later, Otis signed a five-year contract with Duke Records; a single, "Homework", was gleaned from a six-title session and this was the only record release during the life of the contract.

His career has followed a similar course ever since, isolated peaks that show his particular skills are undiminished separated by long periods of obscurity and poor health. A warm and generous man by nature, it's easy to see Otis Rush as a victim of indifferent Fate. Nevertheless, that knowledge can in no way lessen the importance of these forty-year-old sessions that introduced a strikingly original musician. No matter the circumstances of his life, these songs are his legacy...

Neil Slaven – May 2000

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# THE ESSENTIAL OTIS RUSH



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*Cobra*

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